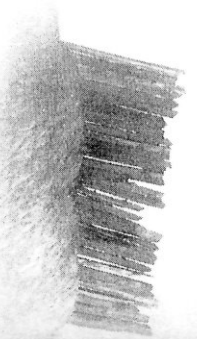


CHAPTER EIGHT

The Crater



The most extensive preparation for any Union offensive at Petersburg was finally over as dawn approached on Saturday, July 30. Pleasants entered the gallery, lit the fuse at 3:15 A.M., and calmly walked out. He kept an eye on his watch, but 3:30 came and went with no explosion. Lt. Col. Byron M. Cutcheon of the 20th Michigan also watched from the position of Willcox's division, 225 yards away. He began to see Pegram's Salient in the first hint of daylight; the sky was completely clear, and Confederate soldiers began to stir. Meade worried at the delay, sending four notes of inquiry to Burnside's temporary headquarters at the Fourteen Gun Battery. The army commander, who temporarily used Burnside's old headquarters site as his own, decided to attack even if the mine did not work. Burnside delayed giving that order until Pleasants had more time to sort out the problem.¹

The Pennsylvania miner waited until 4:15 A.M. to give the charge an hour to blow, then two men volunteered to investigate. Sgt. Henry Reese, who had managed the workforce that dug the gallery, and Lt. Jacob Douy of the 48th Pennsylvania found that all three fuses had gone out at a splice. The two men fixed the problem and rushed out.²

Soon after, at exactly 4:44 A.M., the mine went up with spectacular results. "There flashed out a lily-shaped fountain of dark red and yellow fire, with brown spots and streaks in it," recalled Capt. Thomas W. Clarke, a staff officer serving with Marshall's brigade. Clarke turned to Marshall and said, "Colonel, was anything ever so beautiful as that?" To a man in Bartlett's brigade the ascending cone of earth "seemed to stand still when it reached its height and fell as a shower from a fountain." For those who looked more closely, it was apparent that the clay and sand were mixed with camp equipment, artillery accoutrements, and men, "the red explosions of powder glowing in the horrid mass." The geyser of dirt ascended to about 200 feet before beginning to fall back to earth in a rain of debris. The explosion itself had lifted many men of Ledlie's

division off their stomachs as they lay on the ground behind the forward Union line. Other troops of Ledlie's command instinctively recoiled when it looked as if the debris might fall on them, but Stephen M. Weld insisted that this caused only "momentary" disorder.³

The mine blasted an irregular hole in the earth 125 feet long, 50 feet wide, and 30 feet deep. One hundred thousand cubic feet of dirt were taken out of the ground, and the resulting crater was shaped like "a long Irish potato, the sides of loose pulverized sand piled up precipitately, from which projected huge blocks of clay." After everything settled, the rim around the crater's edge stood 12 feet above the natural level of the earth. Clods of clayish soil "of all sizes from that of a small house down to that of one's fist," lay scattered around the crater.⁴

Richard Pegram happened to be away on the morning of July 30 and thus survived the blast, but nineteen of his men were killed and two were injured. The rightmost thirty yards of his emplacement and two of his guns were intact, although the pieces were partially buried by dirt. The other two guns were blown twenty yards and forty yards forward into no-man's-land. Elliott's infantrymen suffered tremendously. There were 650 men serving in the 18th and 22nd South Carolina, which held the lines closest to the explosion. The two regiments lost 278, or 42.7 percent, of them. Most of those casualties were buried alive, many as they slept.⁵

Douglas's counterminers were very lucky. Sgt. A. H. Smyth was leading a detachment of eight men digging in the gallery of Shaft No. 2 when the mine went up. The shock of the explosion threw him off his feet as the ground "heaved and waved." He got all but one of his men out of the shaft to see that the works all around were destroyed. Shaft No. 1 and its gallery were "blown to atoms."⁶

THE FEDERAL ATTACK

Hunt's artillery and mortars opened fire as soon as the mine exploded. Ledlie's infantrymen hesitated a few minutes, disoriented by the blast and falling debris, but both Bartlett and Marshall pushed their troops across the forward Union line within ten minutes of the explosion. It proved too time-consuming for all to advance by the flank across the bridge of sandbagged trench line, so many Federals tried to climb out of the eight-foot-deep trench by sticking bayonets into the revetment, either at hip or shoulder height. Some men volunteered to hold the other end of the bayonet as their comrades stepped up and out of the trench. What was left of the Union obstructions in front of the line proved to be no obstacle to the advance.⁷

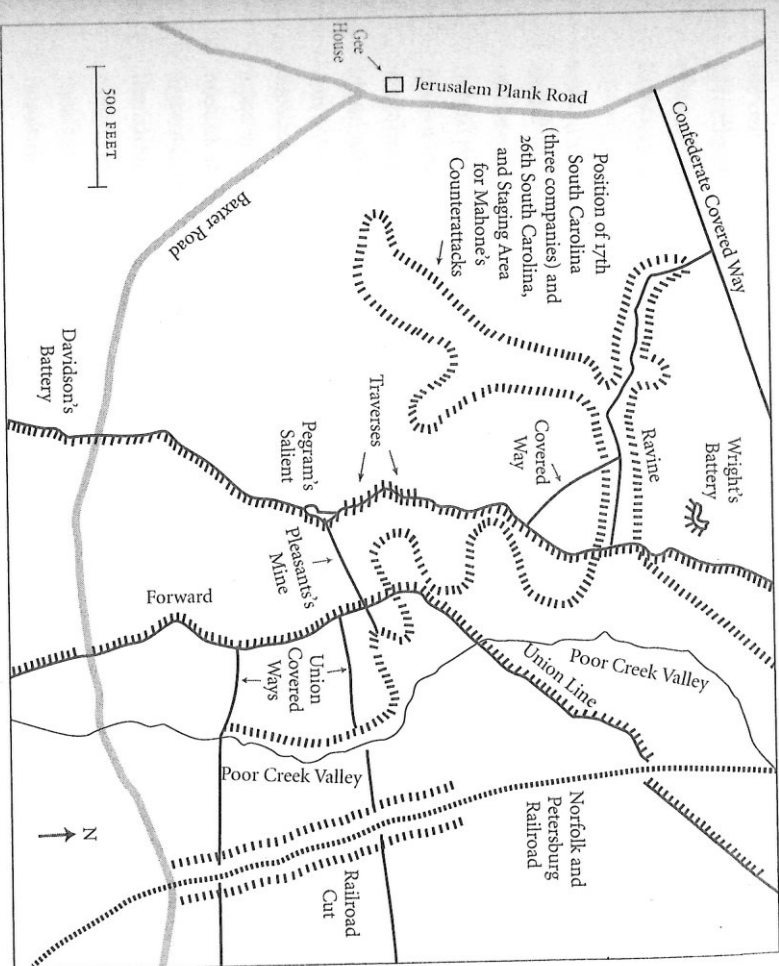
As Ledlie's men streamed into the jagged crater, confusion began to dominate the battlefield. Assuming they were merely to hold the hole, Bartlett and

Marshall made little effort to advance beyond it, and they also found that the crater was not a good place to form regular lines. The men had to assemble any way they could along the rim and were distracted by partially buried Confederate craters who called for help. Ledlie was nowhere to be seen, and Confederate fire began to sweep the area outside the hole.⁸

A portion of Potter's division advanced simultaneously with Ledlie's command. Griffin's Second Brigade crossed the forward Union line just to the right of Ledlie's position and advanced against elements of Elliott's brigade that still held the line north of the crater. Elliott's fire, and the confusion produced by lingering smoke and dust from the explosion, caused Griffin's men to veer left. Several of his regiments entered the hole and mixed with Ledlie's troops. Regimental commanders in both divisions tried to advance northward along the Confederate trench line but encountered substantial resistance. McAfee sent the 49th North Carolina to help. It left its position in the trench and moved across open ground to the rear of the Rebel line, then reentered the trench near the crater. The Tar Heels encountered retreating elements of Elliott's 17th South Carolina, then opened fire at the Yankees in and north of the hole. "Our men aimed steadily and true," recalled Thomas R. Roulhac, "and as each rifle became too hot to be used another gun was at work by one who took the place of the first, or supplied him with rifles which could be handled." This prevented the Unionists from advancing more than 200 yards north of the crater before they stalled.⁹

Any units that tumbled into the crater became engulfed by confusion. With all or parts of three brigades stuffed in, the crater was already "full to suffocation," in the words of Maj. William H. Powell of Ledlie's staff. "Every organization melted away, as soon as it entered this hole in the ground, into a mass of human beings clinging by toes and heels to the almost perpendicular sides. If a man was shot on the crest he fell and rolled to the bottom of the pit." Many men in the crater, like Don E. Scott of Griffin's brigade, were fascinated by the Confederates who were "half buried alive . . . some with their heads downwards & their feet & legs protruding—others with their feet down & buried to their waists & even shoulders with one arm out, and some with neither."¹⁰

A portion of Willcox's division went in immediately after Ledlie. Three regiments of Harttranft's brigade piled into the crater and got stuck while two more halted temporarily in no-man's-land until room could be found for them. Harttranft and the lead regiments crowded into ninety feet of intact gun emplacement, where Harttranft discovered the two partially buried but workable cannon of Pegram's battery. He helped Sgt. Wesley Stanley of the 14th New York Heavy Artillery, of Marshall's brigade, to dig them out. Stanley also found and dug out Pegram's magazine, assigned members of the 14th to the guns, and



Crater Battlefield, July 30, 1864
(based on T. F. Rives Map, 1892, in Bernard, *War Talks*, 320–21)

opened fire at targets south of the crater. Some members of Harttranft's brigade also found the entrance to Shaft No. 1. The crowding in Harttranft's section of the Confederate emplacement eased, and his other three regiments advanced across no-man's-land, when his lead unit, the 27th Michigan, pushed south of the crater against Goode's brigade. It had a tough time, for the 26th and 59th Virginia, helped by fragments of Elliott's 22nd and 23rd South Carolina, put up stiff resistance.¹¹

By 6:00 a.m., the first wave of the Federal attack had advanced into the breach. Four Ninth Corps brigades filled it to capacity. Meade's impatience and frustration grew with each passing minute. "Our chance is now," he telegraphed Burnside; "push your men forward at all hazards (white and black) and don't lose time in making formations, but rush for the crest." Burnside issued directives to all division leaders to "push forward at once," but it was practically impossible. Lt. Col. Charles G. Loring, his assistant inspector general, went into the crater and reported that Ledlie's men could not be moved

forward. Unfortunately, he sent the note to Burnside's old headquarters site instead of to the Fourteen Gun Battery, and it fell into Meade's hands. The army commander became furious that he found out such important news by accident and sent a message to Burnside to use the 5th and 18th Corps as well as his own troops.¹²

On the Confederate side of the battlefield, a great deal of confusion, even panic, emerged among some portions of Elliott's brigade. For about fifteen minutes after the explosion, some of his men ran down the trench line to escape the blast and falling debris. They were "covered with earth and wild with fright," according to one observer. But that passed quickly enough, and what was left of the South Carolina brigade grimly fought to hold its ground. For nearly four hours, and with support from McAfee to the north and Goode to the south, Elliott's men were all that stood in Burnside's way.¹³

Elliott took in the situation and organized a counterattack a little after 6:00 A.M. He tried to form his men outside the works and advance across the open, as the captured trenches were packed with Yankees, but he was shot as soon as he stepped out of the trench. Fifty men, mostly of the 26th South Carolina, also fell within seconds of starting out. Col. Fitz William McMaster of the 17th South Carolina now took command of the brigade and devised a more workable scheme. He sent what was left of Col. Alexander D. Smith's 26th South Carolina and Capt. E. A. Crawford with three companies of the 17th South Carolina, about 200 men, to a shallow ravine due west of the crater. The troops moved through the trench and the covered way, for the ravine drained into the covered way itself. Once in position, these few Confederates could fire into any Union attempt to advance directly toward Jerusalem Plank Road. The rest of the 17th and what was left of the 18th South Carolina remained north of the crater, the only Rebels between it and McAfee's brigade. The Tar Heels extended farther south to meet these remnants.¹⁴

The few troops who stood in Burnside's way could not have held without the fewer Confederate gunners and mortar men who poured fire into the crater area. To the north, Wright's gunners kept up a steady and effective fire throughout the entire battle. Flannery's men also did their duty. The only instance of wavering among Rebel gunners took place in Davidson's Battery to the south. Lt. Otey and some of his men were so shocked by the explosion that they abandoned their guns. His battalion commander, Maj. Wade Hampton Gibbs, personally took charge of the emplacement. Aided by three men from Alexander's staff and some volunteers from Goode's brigade, Gibbs directed the fire of the one gun that was ideally sited to aim at the crater.¹⁵

Lee learned of the mine explosion at 6:10 A.M. and immediately sent a staff member, Col. Charles Venable, to get two brigades of Mahone's division.

Mahone held the Dimmock Line west of Jerusalem Plank Road, the rightmost Confederate unit at Petersburg. He was not fronted by any Union troops; no other division south of the Appomattox could spare sizable numbers of troops to help Johnson's command. After dispatching Venable and checking in at Beauregard's and Johnson's headquarters, Lee went to the Gee House on Jerusalem Plank Road, only 500 yards from the crater, where he found Beauregard already watching the flow of events.¹⁶

Federal signal officers noticed the movement of Mahone's two brigades toward the battlefield, and Meade thought it might be an opportunity for Warren to attack west of the plank road. The Fifth Corps commander could have used Crawford's division, which held the extreme left of the Army of the Potomac, but Meade insisted that Crawford conduct a reconnaissance before he ordered a full-scale attack. Crawford gingerly sent out troops to see what lay ahead a bit after 8:00 A.M. and reported that an attack would be difficult; he had a long distance to move before hitting the Dimmock Line. After digesting this information, Meade authorized Warren to use Ayres's division instead, since it already was in supporting position just to Burnside's left, and to aim at Davidson's gun emplacement to eliminate its fire on the Ninth Corps. By the time all this was worked out, Mahone attacked Burnside's troops in the crater area, and Meade called off all offensive movements. Burnside received no help from the Fifth Corps.¹⁷

With repeated urgings from army headquarters, and becoming desperate at the loss of time and opportunity, Burnside sent in the rest of his corps and some supporting troops beginning about 7:00 A.M. This second wave in the Union offensive merely compounded the problem of crowding in the breach.

Bliss's brigade of Porter's division advanced toward the position defended by McAfee's Tar Heels near the mouth of the ravine. Bliss divided his brigade, dispatching the 51st New York and 2nd New York Mounted Rifles (dismounted) to approach the ravine mouth directly across no-man's-land, while the other three advanced along and cleared the Confederate line toward that objective. His plans immediately changed when an order arrived from corps headquarters to push all troops through the existing gap in the enemy line and head for the crest without delay. Three of Bliss's units tried to do so, but the two New York regiments continued on their separate way, engaged McAfee, and made no headway.¹⁸

Burnside sent in his Fourth Division, which advanced with spirit and widened the crack in the Confederate works. Sigfried's brigade went forward by the flank through the covered way, with the 43rd USCT in the van. It reached the edge of the crater but fortunately did not go into it. The men moved north in front of the Confederate line and just before the abatis, until they overlapped

the Rebel troops. Then they stopped, turned west, and pushed forward. Some Confederates ran immediately while others fought, only to be shot or bayoneted in the trench. The 43rd USCT reportedly captured 200 prisoners and a flag, but Confederate sources admit only 28 lost as prisoners. Nevertheless, two companies of the 17th South Carolina were forced back to another traverse north of the crater, where they put up a wall of sandbags across the trench. The 43rd was lodged only a dozen yards from the sandbag wall.¹⁹

Thomas's brigade advanced out of the covered way immediately after Sigfried and shouldered its way into the packed works. Two of Thomas's regiments got into the crater and became useless for further operations. The rest were separated from Sigfried's position by three regiments of Bliss's brigade, to their right. On their left, the black units became intermingled with Griffin's regiments. It took some time for Thomas to get an appreciable number of his men disentangled from this mess so he could attempt to move forward into contested territory.²⁰

Willcox sent Humphrey's brigade to hit the Confederate line south of the crater, immediately after Ferrero attacked. Humphrey's three right regiments captured 150 yards of trench, forcing the 26th Virginia and the South Carolinians from a traverse where they had earlier stopped the 27th Michigan of Hartranft's brigade. Humphrey also captured forty prisoners. The breach probably could have been widened even more, but the 46th New York hesitated just after it left the forward Union line and lost connection with the regiment to its right. The New Yorkers lost their nerve, broke, and ran back, carrying the other three regiments of the brigade with them.²¹

Turner's Tenth Corps division was next in the lineup. Turner had earlier made his way into the crater, viewed the crowded conditions, and reported to Ord, who was with Burnside at the Fourteen Gun Battery. The Eighteenth Corps commander temporarily was in charge of Turner's division and instructed him to advance to the right. Turner sent in Bell's brigade and reported that it captured 100 yards of Confederate trench, but there is no supporting evidence for this. Bell reached a point just outside the captured Confederate line north of the crater before Mahone's counterattack stopped his further progress at 9:00 A.M. Coan's brigade advanced toward the mouth of the ravine, the same target that two of Bliss's regiments had tried to take, and was halfway across the valley of Poor Creek when Mahone advanced. Curtis's brigade moved through the covered way and took up a reserve position in the forward Union line. Turner's men started too late to accomplish anything.²²

Despite the dispatch of six brigades in the second wave, no appreciable advance from the captured Confederate line appeared imminent. Frustrations at Ninth Corps and army headquarters reached a breaking point. When Meade

learned of the continued stalemate, he demanded a full report of conditions in the crater, implying that Burnside had deliberately kept him in the dark. "I wish to know the truth, and desire an immediate answer," the army commander testily wrote. Burnside's patience snapped. He replied that Meade's message was "unofficiallike and ungentelemanly." It was already 7:30 A.M., nearly three hours after the mine explosion.²³

This exchange was the last straw in a brewing confrontation between Meade and Burnside. It was made worse by the fact that Burnside's chief of staff, Maj. Gen. John G. Parke, was absent on sick leave. Brig. Gen. Julius White replaced him just before midnight of July 29. Parke had diplomatically soothed relations between the two generals, but White sent only one message to Meade all day of July 30, contributing to an atmosphere of misunderstanding and distrust at army headquarters.²⁴

Ledlie also failed to help Burnside that day. After giving the order for his division to advance, he wandered around the Union works for a half-hour before taking refuge in a bombproof where Surgeon Orville P. Chubb of the 20th Michigan had set up an aid station. Ledlie claimed he was hit by a spent ball and was suffering from malarial poisoning. He used both excuses to explain why he was unable to go into the crater, and he asked for something to drink. Surgeon H. E. Smith of the 27th Michigan gave him some rum. When a staff officer brought word that Burnside wanted all troops to advance to the ridge behind Pegram's Salient, Ledlie told him to spread the word and remained in the bombproof.²⁵

By 9:00 A.M., the Federals occupied 320 yards of the Confederate main line north of the crater and about 150 yards south of it. While nearly 500 yards north to south, the breach was very narrow east to west, and all or part of eight Union brigades huddled in it. The 35th Massachusetts, Ledlie's engineer regiment, tried to dig a covered way to link the hole with the forward Union line. This would have incorporated the captured segment into the Federal defenses, but the ground was "hard baked" and difficult to break open even with picks. Moreover, stragglers gathered for shelter behind the crater and got in the way. The Massachusetts men worked very hard at first, then weakened when "nervous prostration" affected their actions.²⁶

The real problem lay not in linking the crater to the Union line but in the failure to push men out of the breach and into the open ground so they could advance to Jerusalem Plank Road. The Federals controlled the maze of Confederate bombproofs that extended 100 feet behind Pegram's gun emplacements and the cavalier that ringed the western edge of the maze. After pushing his men into the warren of holes, brigade commander Thomas was impressed by their complexity. "These pits were different from any in our lines," he later

recalled, "a labyrinth of bomb-proofs and magazines, with passages between." They were an effective obstacle to a further Union advance.²⁷

The black troops took the lead in trying to reach Jerusalem Plank Road. Thomas managed to bring out some of his men, before the white troops to either side of his fragmented command were ready to support him, and they received such heavy fire that the attack faltered before it started. Sigfried's brigade then launched an effort. While two of his regiments could not advance because of entanglement with white units, the 30th and 43rd USCT worked free. Delevan Bates led his regiment forward, his black troops yelling "'Remember Fort Pillow!'" and the South Carolinians shouting back "'Kill 'em! Shoot 'em! Kill the damned niggers!'" Bates was shot in the face but survived his ugly wound, while his men were repulsed.²⁸

Thomas mounted another effort. Lt. Col. John A. Bross of the 29th USCT assembled 300 men of his regiment and the 31st USCT. Bross cut a magnificent figure, clearly visible from Confederate positions, as he stepped into the open ground and began to form his men.²⁹

THE CONFEDERATE COUNTERATTACK

Bross's appearance, more than four hours after the mine explosion, marked the high point of Union efforts on July 30. The appearance of Mahone's division soon after that completely changed the flow of events around the crater. The Confederates went on the counteroffensive and, after three brigade-level attacks and bloody fighting that extended over four hours, restored their broken line.

Mahone decided to lead his two brigades to the battlefield personally. The men slipped out of their position west of Jerusalem Plank Road singly and in small groups, so as not to arouse Federal attention. He then led Weisiger's Virginia brigade, his old command, and Hall's Georgia brigade toward the scene of action. Mahone went ahead and reached Johnson's headquarters at 8:15 A.M., not long after Ferrero's division advanced into the breach. Johnson appeared ready to eat his breakfast and was happy to let Mahone take charge of the Confederate effort, including the use of his own troops. Mahone pumped Johnson for information on the size of the Union front and then followed one of Johnson's aides, who guided him down the covered way and pointed out the shallow ravine as the best place to assemble his troops.³⁰

Mahone entered the ravine and looked toward the crater. "For the moment I could scarcely take in the reality," he later wrote, for the breach was jammed with thousands of Federal soldiers and more than a dozen flags. Mahone could see that the Yankees were "greatly disorganized." He sent word for Sanders's

Alabama brigade to join him and began to place the first two units that were just then arriving on the field.³¹

Weisiger crossed Jerusalem Plank Road after a march of two and a half miles. His men entered the covered way, which had several zigzags at which the Rebels were exposed to the view of those Federals who occupied the crater. Weisiger told his men to run past these places in single file, which slowed his advance a bit. They also met several stragglers from Elliott's brigade, who told them that the Federals were using black troops. This was the first time that Lee's infantry confronted African American soldiers, and the news angered them. "I never felt more like fighting in my life," recalled Lt. Col. William H. Stewart of the 61st Virginia. Mahone stood at the junction of the ravine and the covered way as Weisiger directed his column into the ravine. The Virginians found Elliott's 200 men, who had manfully held the Federals in place for a long time, sheltering behind a line of meager works, apparently dug that morning with bayonets.³²

Bross and his men stepped out of the captured Confederate works and began to assemble for a charge. Some of Weisiger's Virginians took potshots at them as Mahone quickly ordered a charge of his own. It was then about 9:00 A.M.; 800 Virginians stepped out of the ravine and started to cross 200 yards of open space. All or most of Smith's South Carolinians—the 26th and three companies of the 17th—participated in the attack.³³

This charge had an instantaneous effect on the course of the battle. Bross and several of his men were shot down, and the rest jumped back into the captured Confederate works. Many black soldiers in the maze completely lost their nerve and fled in panic. Others fired a volley at Weisiger when the Confederates neared the captured works, but the Confederates plunged into the warren of bombproofs.³⁴

As these opponents struggled in the maze, hundreds of black and white Federals stampeded out of the breach and back to Union lines. Retreating members of Sigfried's brigade ran into Bell's Tenth Corps brigade; they wounded some of Bell's troops by carelessly handling their bayoneted muskets, scattering the white troops and taking them to the rear. Curtis's brigade of Turner's division was just then trying to advance through the covered way and was met by the retreating Federals. A member of the 112th New York recalled that the blacks were "crowding, swearing, yelling, making frantic endeavors to get through; some were down and others treading over them; and those in front were pushed on by the dense mass behind." The New Yorkers had to jump out of the covered way and advance across the open ground, losing fourteen men to Confederate fire in the process. Lt. Freeman Bowley of the 30th USCT wrote that many of

the "blacks were brave in their charge, but, as a body, wholly unmanageable, and totally demoralized in their defeat."³⁵

Weisiger's Virginians and a collection of black and white Federals fought a vicious hand-to-hand combat inside the maze of bombproofs. Weisiger's brigade had veered left in its advance, due to a hail of fire coming from the crater, and its right wing took shelter in the maze behind a traverse that extended rearward from the main Confederate trench. It was located forty yards north of the crater. Hand-to-hand combat took place between this traverse and the ravine to the north.³⁶

"Our men would drive the bayonet into one man," remembered a Virginia officer, "pull it out, turn the butt and knock the brains out of another, and so on until the ditch ran with blood of the dead and dying." A captain of Griffin's brigade heard the Rebels shout, "Save the white men but kill the damn niggers." Another Virginian "saw men slam their bayonets in the Enemy and fire the guns off in them, then I also saw them knock the enemy on the heads with the butt of their guns, & others Cut them with swords." It took twenty minutes of such work for Weisiger's troops to clear all Federals from the captured works north of the traverse. By then, the floors of the trenches were carpeted with bodies, and pools of blood collected in the lower parts. Stewart recalled that the red mud was "shoe-sole deep" in places. In the lull that followed, Rebel officers detailed men "to pile up the dead on the side of the ditch to make room so we could reinforce to the right or left, as occasion might require."³⁷

Weisiger's attack did not reclaim all of the captured Rebel works. The Unionists who evacuated the trenches north of the crater retreated into the hole itself. About 600 Federals jammed into the crater; some took position along the rim and fired at the enemy. When hit in the head, they "rolled down the steep sides to the bottom, and in places they were piled up four and five deep." Bartlett told Freeman Bowley to build a barricade across the trench that entered the north side of the crater. His men used dirt clods at first and then piled bodies of both white and black men across the opening.³⁸

The Federals also evacuated their holdings south of the crater. Hartranft pulled the Michigan units that held the trench back to the intact segment of Pegram's Salient, where Stanley still fired two Rebel guns. By about 9:30 A.M. the crater and this intact segment were the only part of the breach under Union control.³⁹

Even before Weisiger attacked, Grant and Meade had come to the conclusion that the attack was a failure and ought to be called off. They delayed issuing the order upon receiving reports that the black troops were making headway, but Mahone's counteroffensive convinced them to call off the operation. They agreed that there was no need to hold what Burnside had gained.⁴⁰

The Ninth Corps commander received two orders to retire between 9:30 and 10:00 A.M., but he was reluctant to do so. He rode to army headquarters with Ord and tried to convince Meade to keep trying. Meade refused, and tempers grew hot—Burnside's desperate effort to save his offensive fell on deaf ears, and even Ord refused to support his plea. Meade allowed him to postpone the withdrawal until nightfall. Burnside rode back to the Fourteen Gun Battery and issued a directive to his subordinates in the crater at 12:20 P.M., leaving it up to them to decide when and how to pull out.⁴¹

Mahone had no intention of allowing the Federals to determine their own fate. He told Hall to take his Georgia brigade into action, hit the area south of the traverse that marked the extent of reclaimed ground, and drive the Yankees out of the crater. The Georgians tried at about 11:00 A.M. but failed. They veered left to avoid heavy fire coming out of the crater, bringing the brigade exactly behind Weisiger's Virginians, who were sheltering in the maze of Confederate bombproofs. Mahone could only hope that Sanders's brigade arrived soon. Johnson appeared on the battlefield and offered to help coordinate the next attack. While Goode's brigade and remnants of Elliott's command advanced toward the crater from the south, Mahone would send Sanders directly toward the hole from the ravine. They fixed 1:00 P.M. as the time for action. Meanwhile, John C. Haskell advanced two Coehorn mortars that were in the ravine into the reclaimed Confederate works, only a few yards away from the crater, and began to lob shells into the chasm. Lamkin's gunners fired the pieces with very small charges.⁴²

For some two and a half hours, as the Confederates waited for Sanders, conditions worsened inside the crater. It was a particularly hot day, with temperatures rising from 80 degrees at 6:00 A.M. to 99 degrees by noon, as the sun baked the raw, upturned clay. William Powell noted that the heat caused "waves of moisture produced by the exhalation from this mass to rise above the crater." Charles H. Houghton of the 14th New York Heavy Artillery was sickened by the sight of "dead and dying all around us; blood was streaming down the sides of the crater to the bottom, where it gathered in pools for a time before being absorbed by the hard red clay."⁴³

Many of Lamkin's mortar shells burrowed into the ground and did no harm, but a lot of them burst in the air with frightful effect. One hit an officer of a Maine regiment and exploded at the same time, disintegrating his head and upper body. His remains fell "sloping downwards, and the blood rushed out as from an overturned bucket," according to Freeman Bowley. Thirst, heat, fear, and the awful sight of mangled bodies took their toll on morale. Gradually, more Federals along the crater rim lost heart and stopped firing. They simply turned around and braced themselves on the sloping sides of the hole,

and no encouragement by officers could induce them to do otherwise. Several Ottawa Indians serving in Company K, 1st Michigan Sharpshooters, "pulled their blouses over their faces and chanted a death song."⁴⁴

When the brigade leaders received Burnside's order to retire, they agreed it was too dangerous to attempt it in daylight. Yet they needed artillery support, tools, sandbags, and ammunition to hold out in the crater until dusk. Cutcheon went back to the forward Union line to inform Burnside of these needs; he barely escaped with his life while dodging the hail of Confederate fire across no-man's-land.⁴⁵

All these preparations for an orderly retreat became futile when Sanders attacked at 1:00 p.m. with about 630 men. The 61st North Carolina, sent from Clingman's brigade of Hoke's division, participated in the charge, while the 23rd South Carolina and part of the 22nd South Carolina of Elliott's brigade advanced along the Confederate main line south of the crater.⁴⁶

Sanders guided his men directly toward the crater because most of the Federals had given up their firing positions along the rim. William H. Randall of the 1st Michigan Sharpshooters noted that many Unionists "could not be drove to take a part in the action." The Alabamians advanced to the foot of the crater rim but then stopped, uncertain how to cross the twelve-foot-tall berm. For a while they threw dirt clods, shell fragments, and bayoneted muskets across. A few of the braver Confederates crawled to the top of the rim and stuck their muskets over to fire into the crater. Capt. William B. Young, who served on Sanders's staff, received a message from Mahone asking why the brigade did not close in and finish the job. Young personally sought the division commander and explained to him, "General they are so thick in there that if men jumped over they would jump into a bayonet and the men know it." Mahone advised recruiting volunteers to lead the way. The men themselves worked out a scheme before Young could act on Mahone's suggestion. They put hats on their bayonets and lifted them to draw Yankee fire, then crossed the rim in a rush.⁴⁷

Once inside the hole, Sanders's men shot and stabbed blacks even after the Yankees gave up. While some Confederate officers encouraged this, others tried to stop it. The brigade had never fought black soldiers before, and the men "seemed particularly incensed against them," recalled a member of the 9th Alabama.⁴⁸

The close-range combat in this crowded hole was terrible, and even some Union officers apparently killed black enlisted men "in order to preserve the whites from Confederate vengeance." A Georgia rebel named James Paul Verdery who witnessed the fighting reported to his sister the next day, "The Bayo-

net was plunged through their hearts & the muzzle of our guns was put on their temple & their brains blown out." After a half-hour of such unequal combat, the crater was in Confederate hands. Sanders captured about 500 Federals and three flags.⁴⁹

THE AFTERMATH

The battle of the crater ended about 1:45 p.m., but neither Grant nor Meade fully realized it for many hours. Burnside was so stunned by the events of the day, and so angry with Meade, that he failed to inform army headquarters. Grant spent the rest of July 30 contemplating further action. Since Lee apparently was not yet shifting troops to the south side of the Appomattox, Grant wanted to send an infantry corps and some cavalry to tear up twenty miles of the Weldon and Petersburg Railroad the next day. Meade was willing and suggested using the Eighteenth Corps. When signal officers reported Confederate movement across the river, Grant canceled the raid and began to warn Meade that Lee might attempt a counterattack late on July 31 or early on August 1. He also wanted the heavy artillery that had supported Burnside's attack to be removed to a safe depot on the Appomattox River. Grant sent final orders for Butler to dispatch those brigades of the Nineteenth Corps that were serving with the Army of the James to Washington, D.C., and further instructed Meade to strip the trenches and sally out to meet the Confederates in the open if they tried to turn his left flank. This was enough to send Meade into a frenzy of preparation for an attack that Lee never contemplated. Henry L. Abbot removed fifty-two pieces of heavy artillery and mortars eight miles to Broadway Landing in record time on the night of July 30. He left thirty-three guns and mortars on the Bermuda Hundred Line and twenty-nine on the Petersburg Line, in addition to the field batteries under Hunt's control.⁵⁰

The first task for the Confederates after the fighting ended was to clear out the works. This was a gruesome job, for the crater, the trenches north and south, and the maze of bombproofs were littered with bodies. One observer noted a spot in the crater where the dead were eight deep. "The bottom was layered with mangled men," recalled William H. Stewart; "the dead trimmed the sides. . . . It was a veritable inferno filled with sounds of suffering and paved with the rigid dead."⁵¹

Lt. Thomas Smith of the 16th Virginia superintended the burial of the dead inside the crater. He counted 177 bodies; about 20 percent were blacks, and the rest were equally divided between white Unionists and Confederates. The Confederates rolled the dead down the sides to the bottom and shoveled dirt onto them from the walls. When those who died in the mine explosion were

added, estimates of the number of men buried in the crater varied from 200 to 300. Black prisoners were forced to dig a burial trench just to the rear of the crater to inter the dead lying in the rest of the recaptured works.⁵²

By dusk of July 30, the men of Weisiger's and Sanders's brigades had "dug with our bayonets a foothold" along the crater rim to serve as firing positions. They had to do much more work in the coming weeks to restore the defenses of Pegram's Salient. The dead remained buried at the bottom of the crater, walked on by hundreds of Confederates who held the chasm for the rest of the campaign. The smell of those Federals who died in no-man's-land was so strong that Stewart's Virginians were unable to consume their rations, even though they had not eaten for twenty-four hours.⁵³

Grant lost 3,798 men in this fiasco, 1,413 of whom were captured or missing. Burnside suffered all but 300 of those losses, and Ferrero's division accounted for more than one-third of all Union casualties. The black troops made up 41 percent of the Federals killed, even though they accounted for only 20 percent of the men engaged. The Confederates lost from 1,100 to 1,600 men. Mahone's men captured more than 900 Yankees and twelve to twenty flags. Two Union brigade leaders — Bartlett and Marshall — were taken captive, while Griffin and Hartman managed to escape with some of their men when Sanders launched the final Confederate attack.⁵⁴

Willcox thought that about fifty wounded Federals lay between the lines after the battle. Potter's men dug a sap under the parapet of their forward trench and extended it far enough on the night of July 30 to recover six of them, but the rest could not be reached. They shared this narrow strip of ground with up to 300 dead, and the air was foul all around. Weisiger's troops finally grew accustomed to the smell so that they were able to eat breakfast on the morning of July 31, "a day of hot sunshine and sickening odors," as William Stewart recalled.⁵⁵

Meade wanted Burnside to arrange an informal truce to recover the remaining wounded and bury the dead, but the Confederates insisted on protocol. Meade addressed a letter requesting a truce to Lee, who forwarded it to Beauregard because the latter's departmental command was responsible for holding this sector. By the time the request went through proper channels, it was too late in the day. Officers arranged it for 5:00 A.M. of August 1, and local commanders worked out the details. They established a picket line down the middle of no-man's-land. The Confederates moved dead and wounded Yankees up to that line and delivered them into Union hands, while the Federals ranged freely on their side of the line. Thousands of Union and Confederate troops crowded the parapets of the opposing works to watch. "It was our first chance to stand up and look over since the beginning of the siege," commented a man in the 49th North Carolina. The Federals recovered only about twenty wounded who

were still alive, and they buried at least 220 dead by 11:00 A.M. Many of the latter were so mangled by artillery fire that they literally lay in fragments. The burning sun had turned other bodies into "a swollen and putrifying mass, unrecognizable." Blacks were buried with whites, and the Confederates found twelve of their comrades lying dead between the lines, probably prisoners who had been caught in the crossfire while trying to reach Union lines.⁵⁶

Grant himself led the way in characterizing the attack as a "miserable failure," the "saddest affair I have witnessed in the war." "So fair an opportunity will probably never occur again for carrying fortifications," he told Meade. "Our experience of to-day proves that fortifications come near holding themselves without troops," he continued with little exaggeration. "With a reasonable amount of artillery and one infantryman to six feet I am confident either party could hold their lines against a direct attack of the other."⁵⁷

Meade's subordinates fully agreed. "The affair proved a fiasco, a most miserable fizzle," commented Charles Wainwright. Burnside's troops felt the humiliation and the frustration most keenly. Cutcheon, who barely escaped from the crater, wrote in his autobiography that the attack "was botched and bungled and bedeviled from the beginning." Charging earthworks was "one of the follies of modern warfare, provided the works are only half manned," reasoned William Taylor of the 100th Pennsylvania.⁵⁸

Many factors contributed to the failure of this Union offensive, among them Ledié's inability to give proper instructions to his brigade commanders. Bartlett and Marshall were good leaders who would have tried to go through the crater and advance toward Jerusalem Plank Road if they had known that was their assignment. Instead, their brigades effectively plugged the breach in the Confederate line. The Union guns failed to play a decisive role in the battle, even though they fired more than 10,000 rounds. In contrast, Wright's gray-clad gunners fired only 600 rounds with telling effect.⁵⁹

While the Confederates rejoiced at their deliverance, the editor of the *Richmond Enquirer* saw reason for alarm. He was loath to criticize Rebel engineers but pointed out that they could have avoided the near-catastrophe of July 30 if they had intercepted Pleasant's gallery. The editor went on to use the mine as an example of Yankee technical superiority. "The mechanical skill of these people was shown in the facility with which they have intrenched themselves in the field, and the formidable earthworks which they erect to cover their cowardly Dutch and negroes. It has been signally shown by the perseverance of Grant before Vicksburg, and by the recent mine before Petersburg, and, indeed, by works which dot and deface the whole South."⁶⁰

There was no cause for rejoicing on the Union side of no-man's-land, despite the validity of the Richmond editor's viewpoint. Burnside suggested trying the

mine again, reporting that the gallery was intact up to the tamping. He proposed starting two branches twenty-five feet from the tamping and extending them to both sides of the crater to reach the Confederate line, believing it would take only "a few days" to dig them. Meade ignored the suggestion. In fact, the army commander had every intention of getting rid of Burnside. Grant authorized Meade to grant the Ninth Corps commander a leave of absence on August 13, assigning Parke to replace him. The leave became permanent a few months later. Ledlie was granted a sick leave on August 4, which was later converted into an indefinite leave of absence. He resigned in January 1865.⁶¹

Meade separated these officers from his army and convinced Grant to authorize a court of inquiry into the cause of the fiasco. Headed by Hancock, the court was packed with men Meade could rely on to see things his way. It began meeting on August 6 and interviewed thirty-two people. Most of them stated that they had no faith in the operation and criticized many details of the preparation. Both Meade and Burnside offered lengthy testimony. After seventeen days of hearings, the court filed a report that leaned heavily on Burnside as the chief cause of the disaster. The court identified faulty troop formations, the halt of Ledlie's men inside the crater, poor use of engineer officers and troops, and poor leadership by many Ninth Corps officers as additional causes.⁶²

Burnside and his supporters eagerly cooperated when the Joint Congressional Committee on the Conduct of the War held its own investigation. This committee had a long-standing antipathy toward Meade, and its members gave Burnside opportunities to present his case in a more favorable light. It interviewed several officers the court of inquiry had ignored, as well as many who had testified before Hancock's panel. The committee gathered testimony in December 1864, and its report cited Meade's interference with Burnside's plan as the chief cause of the failure. Yet the committee members were careful to blame Burnside as well. As a result, the congressmen issued a more fair and balanced report than the army officers.⁶³